



NORTHERN IRELAND
IN

1000

STORIES



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IN
100
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thrive
making culture count





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Introduction

Art brings people back to their sensibility as human beings. This is the purpose of art: To bring people together and bring back the humanity as well.

When I am out talking to arts organisations about their relationships with audiences, it is no exaggeration to say that I am regularly humbled by the power of art to change individual lives and make our collective experience better.

But as regular is the frustration expressed that the story told about art and artists is that of its perceived limited value. That art is, at best, a past time of the elite or a hobby – something to be dabbled in until you secure “a real job”.

At thrive, we work in the realm of research into cultural engagement – providing evidence of the reality of the impact of arts and culture on Northern Ireland and its people. Our data consistently proves that this story told about the arts is not true.

Fiona Bell
CEO, thrive

Northern Ireland in 100 Stories was designed and delivered by thrive, and supported by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

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making culture count



We wanted to provide evidence about the difference art makes in this place, and from this desire, 100 Stories was born.

We travelled all across Northern Ireland talking to 120 people and asking them their stories about how their lives have been changed by the arts.

What you will read in the coming pages are 11 of those stories. They were selected because of their power and range, showing the many different ways lives can be touched by arts.

We hope you enjoy reading them as much as we enjoyed hearing them.



Maisie
Antrim and Newtownabbey



Allison
Ards and North Down



Glen
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon



Ian
Belfast



Jon
Causeway Coast and Glens



Caoimhe
Derry City and Strabane



Chris
Fermanagh and Omagh



Sandra
Lisburn and Castlereagh



Matthias
Mid and East Antrim



Cathal
Mid Ulster



Claire
Newry, Mourne, and Down



Allison

Ards and North Down



When we first met Allison in Portico of Ards, we couldn't fail to notice her charisma and the impact she had made as she entered the room. This snazzy woman in her early 70s had her make-up and nails done and sported an outfit that matched her blue eyes. She knew everyone in the building, and her confidence and wit were infectious.

Originally from East Belfast, Allison has been living in Portaferry for over 20 years. The love affair with the place began after she met her husband who had a caravan in the area in the mid-1980s. Little did she know that it would be her third husband who would bring her back to Portaferry for good. Yes, it wasn't just the place she fell in love with.

Allison is a retired teacher. She loved her job and, in her words, always wanted to make her pupils feel wonderful and valued. "I don't care what you do in life, just do it well," she told one of her students one day. And he reminded her, years later, that the person he became today was thanks to her. She fought for special educational needs throughout her whole career and won awards for her dedication and excellence.

Her father died when she was a teenager and she always felt like she never had the time to understand who he was and what his life was like when he was younger. This sparked a curiosity about history, especially the decade before partition, which has stayed with her throughout her life. She has written books and exhibitions on the subject.

A lot of Allison's spare time is dedicated to her 14 grandchildren. She loves taking them to arts and culture activities. It has to be affordable though as she could sometimes be taking 5

of her grandchildren at one time. Museums, exhibitions, cinema, panto at Christmas – you name it. There's not a stone left unturned to entertain her grandkids.

"I take them to anything that I think I could afford. One of the problems at the moment about arts and culture is that it has become so extraordinarily expensive."

When she doesn't go with her grandchildren, she sometimes goes with her friends. She would go to things locally or organise a trip to Belfast to go to the Lyric or to the Opera House. However, she doesn't go as much as she once did because it is harder to get to Belfast from Portaferry. Allison also reads a lot and likes going to pubs, whether it's for a quiz or listening to live music.

"When you don't live in Belfast. It's that little bit harder. We have a group of friends and we would organise outings. My husband drives here for community transport, so he can hire the minibus for the day. Our last thing was to the Lyric. And we had 14 of us, all pensioners. But we went up for a night, and we had a meal somewhere and went to the Lyric."

When asked about her childhood, Allison said she doesn't ever remember being taken to arts events as a child. That wasn't something her working class family did.

But the more we talked, the more it was obvious that arts and culture had always been a part of her life. They regularly went to the cinema as a family and her parents were both musical: her father played the fiddle, and her mother was a pianist. They were both members of a dance band and this was how they met. On Saturday nights, relatives came over to their house and they all played music together. Because she wasn't musical, she learnt to recite poetry so she could perform alongside her family. When she was a teenager, she travelled to London with her brothers to see plays and concerts.

Ultimately, for Allison, arts and culture means escapism. Without it, she believes life would be dull and sad.

“That’s what arts and culture is. It’s escaping from your reality, whatever your reality is. And let’s face it, no matter how healthy we are or good our lives are, everybody needs a bit of an escape.”

“Without arts and culture, life would be dull, dead, without imagination we have nothing. We would just live with the reality of life. I think life would be very sad. Life would be very empty without books. And it’d be very sad without pubs. I feel very depressed

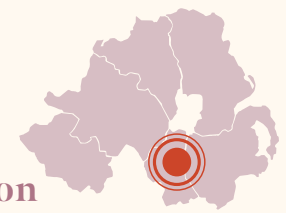
when I see pubs closing down. I think the demise of pubs is probably one of the most disheartening things that I’ve seen, because that was where you formed your ideals and your philosophies and your debates. And you discussed things.”





Glen

Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon



We loved sitting down with Glen and learning about his creative talents and how he uses them for the benefit of his community in a variety of different ways. He works as a civil servant and this has allowed him to strike a balance between his day job and focussing on his poetry. His first memory of engaging with the arts and culture, is writing a poem as a child and receiving encouragement from a teacher. It was this encouragement that began his journey as a writer and creative.

Originally hailing from Richhill, Glen studied English and Politics at university in Belfast and moved to Portadown a few years after graduating. Glen is a passionate writer and having already published one volume of poetry, he is currently creating another, which details the history of Portadown. Glen's love of poetry saw him join a creative writing group in the town around ten years ago, the group has since disbanded but he keeps in touch with some friends he has made there to share his new works with them and importantly to get feedback.

“I think you have to have passions, or things that you are going to get the time to and commit to on a regular basis and I think if we don't get those things, you can maybe feel a bit short-changed.”

Glen finds he expresses himself best through poetry. Prose is something he has tried before but its length and pre-planning isn't as enjoyable to him as the brevity and depth he finds he can create on a single page of verse. He loves to travel to writing events and learn from other poets and has attended events in Rostrevor and in Bray, Co. Wicklow. These experiences have steered him towards focussing more on writing itself and less on reciting and performing his works. He has also made the leap from writer to also facilitating workshops and sharing his skills; he says he loves the sense of achievement that goes with creating a new poem.

“I think for me music is one of those things, I think it's very useful in terms of your thinking, it just opens up different avenues for you.”

Music is a huge part of Glen's family life with each member of his family playing an instrument or singing. He is also a long time member of his local church worship group.

A guitar player since age 16, Glen popped guitar down as a hobby when applying for a trip to Paraguay organised by the church despite only having basic knowledge of how to play. This served him well and he's been making music since. Music is important to Glen as it's something he feels he can give back to and serve the community with, having performed at numerous charity events in aid of SANDS Lights of Love, a stillborn support group. Glen and his family are frequent visitors to Tollymore Forest Park, the Mourne and Armagh. As a family they love to stream TV shows when at home and Glen himself usually has two or three books on the go at any time. Glen believes that Portadown has a lot of potential in terms of history, arts and culture.

He believes the local area needs a more focussed plan as events are usually poorly promoted and as a result people miss out on them, sometimes only hearing about them after an event has happened.

For Glen, arts and culture are a means of helping lift those around you and inviting them to experience something new:

“I think it’s important just in terms of people’s overall wellbeing that they need to do something that’s not just like go to work and eat food and start again. I think there needs to be something in other ways, I think that’s why the arts is so important in terms of, it gives you something outside yourself to sort of connect to.”





Ian

Belfast



If you live in Belfast, we'd be surprised if you hadn't met Ian yet. This man in his early 50s goes to everything and anything. So much so that when we ask cultural organisations around us whether they heard of Ian, they instantly know who we are referring to. Ian first came on our radar when he took part in a project we worked on for Belfast City Council, called the Audience Panel. He religiously responded to our surveys every month, always offering insightful comments, and participated in all our focus groups. Ian loves engaging with arts and culture. And it was a pleasure to get to know him better during our interview.

“When you're sat there and enraptured in it. You know, moments like that come up in a theatre, transformative moments in theatre. I mean, they happen all the time. That feeling, you know, when it goes like that. You're outside yourself. You're in a separate transcendent moment.”

Ian always goes to things by himself. Not because he doesn't have anybody to go with, but more because he's too eager to go out and experience what he loves the most. Attending arts and culture events is the ultimate thrill for him. He loves getting immersed in a play or in a music concert – we hear the only genre he's not too keen on is heavy metal. He loves the communal experience he gets from being in the same room with like-minded people he doesn't know. Whether it's the crowd singing along in unison or the way a full audience would gasp at the same moment, these are the feelings he is most looking forward to at every outing.

Ian is partially blind. He doesn't talk about it as something that prevents him from doing what he loves. To the contrary, he doesn't see it as a barrier at all. He can't drive because of his disability, so he takes the bus to go places instead. As he is so reliant on public transport, knowing the timings of events he goes to is a necessity. If a show finishes past 23.00, it is too late for him to catch the last bus and he would then have to get a taxi to get home. He repeated several times during our conversation that he doesn't want to blame anybody for the obstacles he sometimes encounters in his engagement with arts and culture. However, he did mention a few instances when text was displayed on a large screen during plays he attended and he wasn't able to read it because it was too small and too bright. He wished he had known this was the case before booking tickets as he felt like he missed some of the context at times.

Ian comes from a working class background and told us his love for art was quite unusual amongst his peers as he was growing up, especially men. When he was younger, his mother would always be the one taking him and his brother to cultural events, but his father never joined in. His brother wouldn't be as into arts and culture as much as Ian is today, and people he went to school with regarded arts as something that wasn't for them. Ian always was the arty one, the bookish boy who always has 3 books on the go.

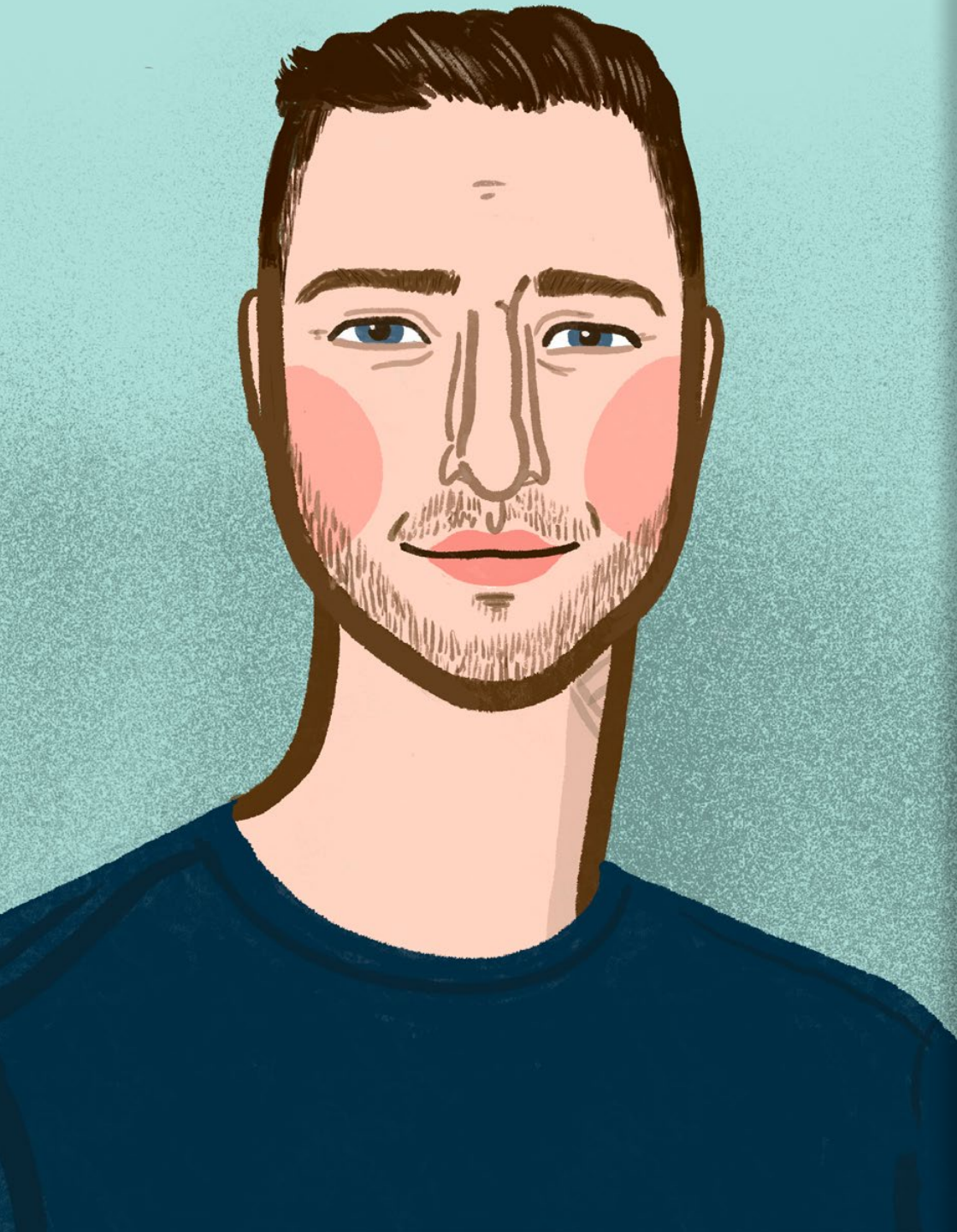
“If you see me in the interval, I'm probably still in my seat reading the book. There are two books I would have sitting on my side table and there's a separate book in the bag here, which I read on buses.”

For Ian, arts and culture is his “primary means of enjoyment”. He frequently engages with arts and culture because he loves learning new things but also because of its benefits for his mental health. He calls it his “magical elixir” and can't see his life without it.

“I'm deeply curious in everything. I realised that I actually love to learn, you know, to experience new things.”

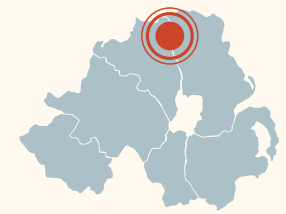
“I can see why people don't like classical music or don't like theatre, but I can't really see how people can have a life without the arts, without any of it.”





Jon

Causeway Coast and Glens



Jon lives on the North Coast with his wife and two young kids, who are under 5. His son has autism. He currently works at his family business and cares for his son's additional needs.

Juggling with caring responsibilities and work doesn't leave much leisure time for Jon. He still finds the time throughout his day to listen to podcasts or music, whether it's in the car while driving his son to school or to work. When he's not driving, Jon often wears earphones. He loves listening to music while he works, runs errands or simply potters around the house. But it's also a way for him to cope with his tinnitus. Listening to things helps him to take his mind away from the continuous ringing.

Jon describes himself as a nerd. He's passionate about software engineering, fonts and the intricacies of typefaces. But arts and culture also has its place in his life. When Jon was younger, his parents would have taken him and his siblings to pantomimes in the Grand Opera House every Christmas. His Dad bought him a big stereo when he was around 5 and he would listen to the radio and play cassettes. Jon thinks this is what initiated his love for music. As a teenager, he would have travelled to Belfast or Dublin to go to gigs.

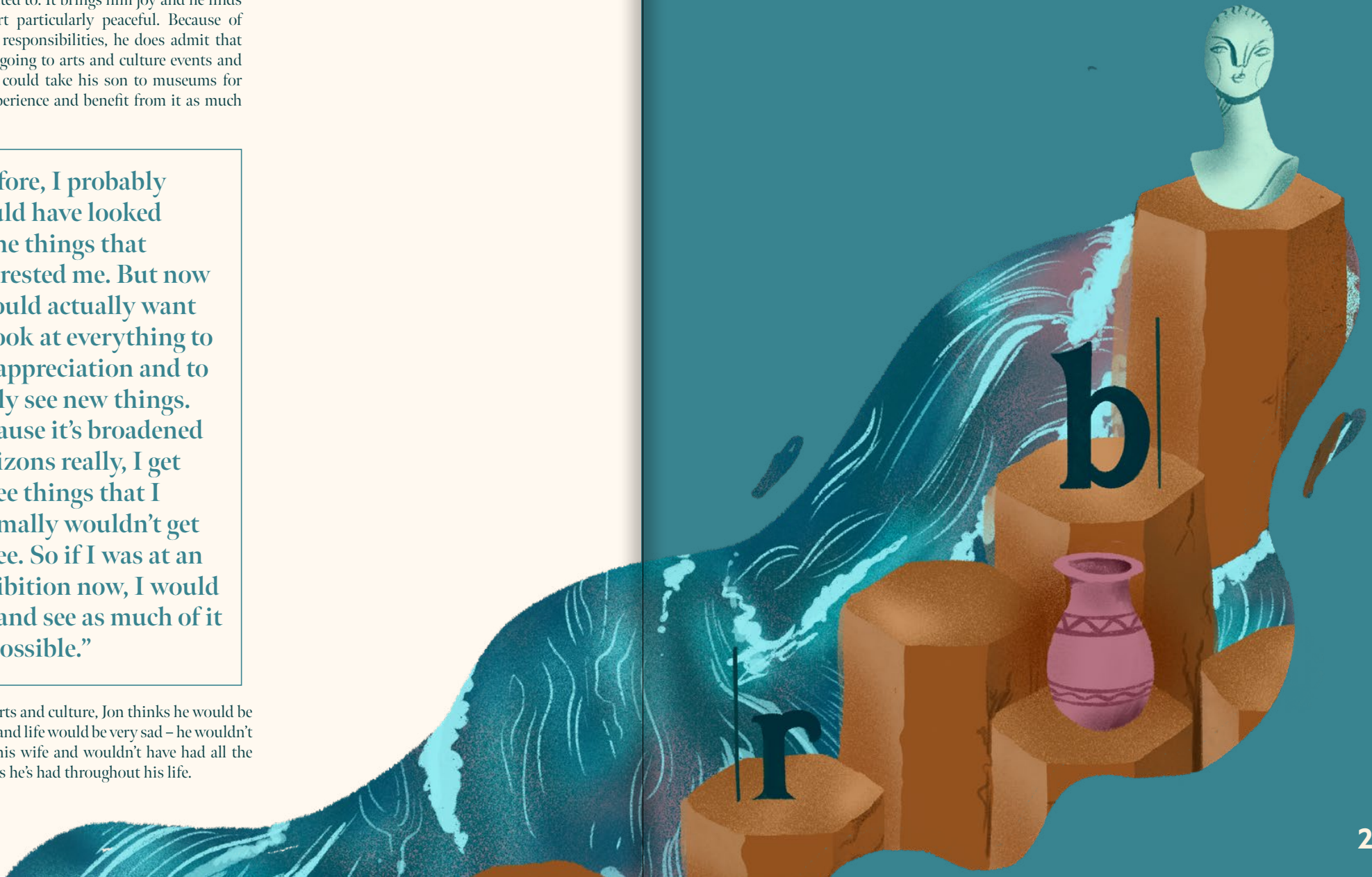
"Just the laughs, it was just so exciting. Because every year there was a different theme, whether it was Aladdin or Cinderella. You always got to see a few local celebrities as well because every year they had a couple of different people that we'd recognize from like soap operas and things like that. It was just so fun. And it was just a good day. You know, everyone really enjoyed it from parents to kids, and we looked forward to it every year, I was always excited."

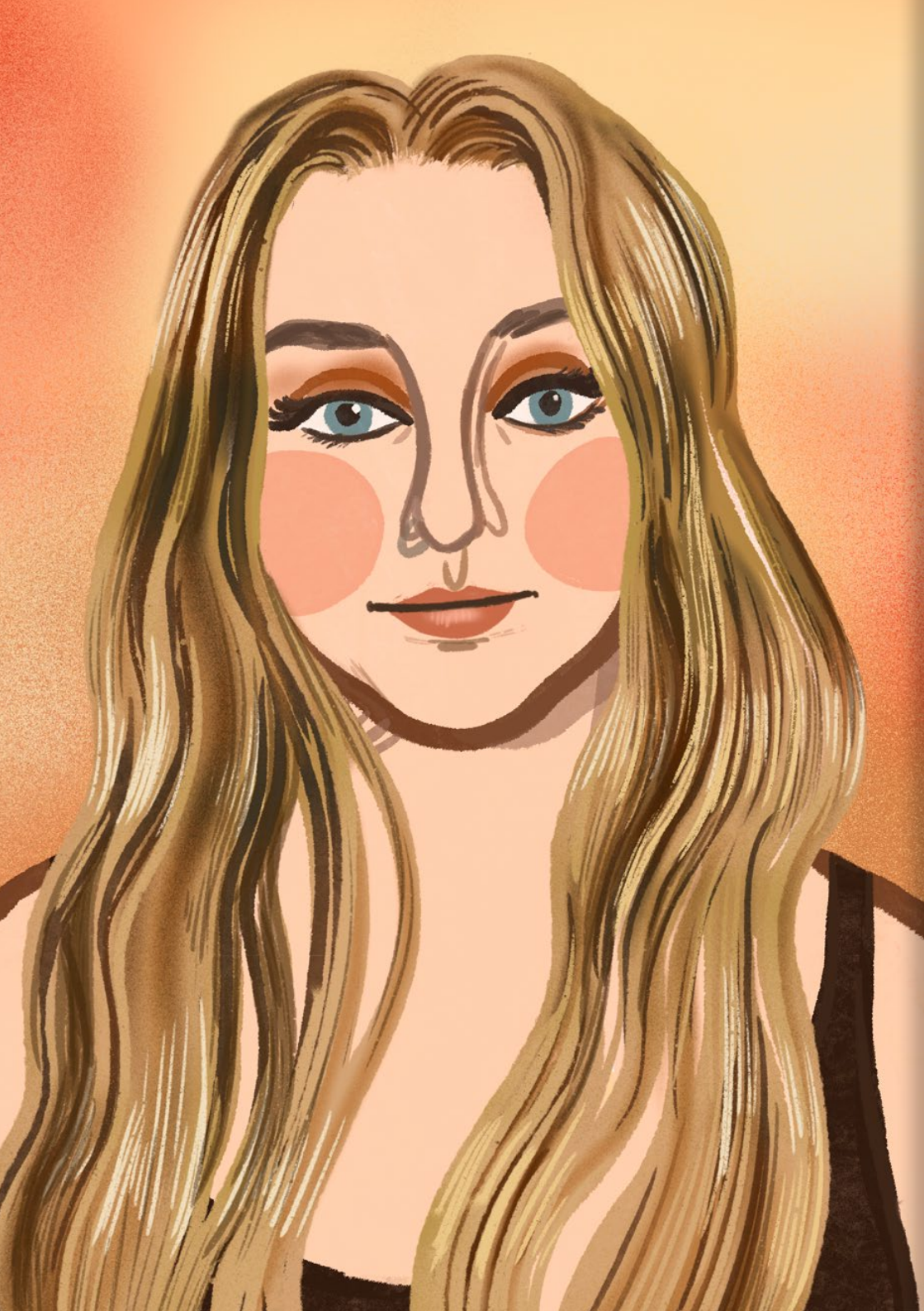
But it is when he met his wife that he discovered a whole other aspect of the arts world that he was never interested in before. She introduced him to museums and classical arts and he found that fascinating. Before they had children, they would have gone to Edinburgh or London for short weekend getaways specifically with the purpose to visit museums. They also would have gone to National Trust sites regularly and took part in running events that covered a lot of interesting areas such as trails in natural heritage sites. Since having kids, they haven't had the time to do any of those activities. Today, they usually stay on the North Coast and go for a stroll in their local park. They would occasionally go to Portrush and have a coffee on the beach, when Jon's mum is able to watch their son for a few hours.

What Jon enjoys the most about arts and culture is its learning aspect. He sees it as an opportunity to gain knowledge about things he wouldn't have got to know otherwise. It made him appreciate things that he wouldn't have expected to. It brings him joy and he finds modern art particularly peaceful. Because of his caring responsibilities, he does admit that he misses going to arts and culture events and wishes he could take his son to museums for him to experience and benefit from it as much as he did.

“Before, I probably would have looked at the things that interested me. But now I would actually want to look at everything to get appreciation and to really see new things. Because it’s broadened horizons really, I get to see things that I normally wouldn’t get to see. So if I was at an exhibition now, I would try and see as much of it as possible.”

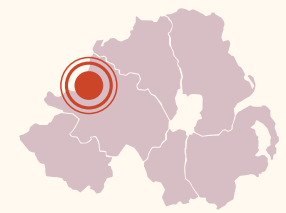
Without arts and culture, Jon thinks he would be miserable and life would be very sad – he wouldn't have met his wife and wouldn't have had all the experiences he's had throughout his life.





Caoimhe

Derry City and Strabane



On the day we met Caoimhe, we quickly realised that she was a force to be reckoned with, in the best possible way! Between studying for university, working as a freelance theatre technician, and a busy family and social life, it's a wonder that Caoimhe has any time for herself. Another thing that is clear, is that at just 24, she has already established many great passions in her life; her family, the Maiden City itself, her hometown of Derry and a fierce love of the arts.

The eldest of three daughters, Caoimhe has been involved in the arts community all her life. She began taking Irish dancing lessons at just three years of age and one of her earliest memories is learning the 1-2-3's at a local community hall.

“I just felt like I was like the queen of the world. Like I was so cool. Doing this - the most basic stuff you can do felt like... really proud or something.”

At five years old, she started ballet - and by ten, she had added theatre to the list. Caoimhe comes from a very close-knit family and grew up in a household that truly embraced culture. She fondly remembers childhood trips to museums, pantomimes, and the theatre. Her youngest sister is also creative, and her middle sister, who lives in Belfast, is often her gig buddy when Caoimhe is visiting there.

Caoimhe's Grandad used to tell her how creativity was in her family's blood and how **'they [the family] would all been writing plays and involved in stuff'**. Caoimhe is close to both her grandparents and has been living with them

for the past eight years. Her grandmother is mostly bed-bound and while her condition has impacted their living circumstances, they still have a lot of fun. Instead of going to Mass, the whole family will now come round to watch the mass at her grandparents each week, to honour their **'proper wee Catholic granny'**.

While most of us spent Covid learning how to make banana bread or binging *Tiger King*, Caoimhe was beginning her academic career. She studied drama at Ulster University and is currently in the process of completing a part-time course in Peace and Conflict studies at the same university. This puts Caoimhe in the unique position of having almost completed two degrees entirely online. Caoimhe used the time to learn unique skills such as video editing and she is now the go-to person of her class for all editing. She loves her course and how it enables her to **'incorporate my arts knowledge into something so like, complex and different.'**

Music has always played a part of Caoimhe's life. She played violin as a young child but over time, the classes became more of a chore than enjoyable. She found the rising cost of renting the violin a financial struggle that she didn't want to burden her parents with. In Covid, she bought a guitar online and has been teaching herself ever since. She likes how there is no pressure to learn the guitar and in turn, she has found learning it far more enjoyable to learn.

As if she was not busy enough, Caoimhe somehow finds the time to work part-time at Waterside Theatre, Derry, as a theatre technician. She absolutely loves the work.

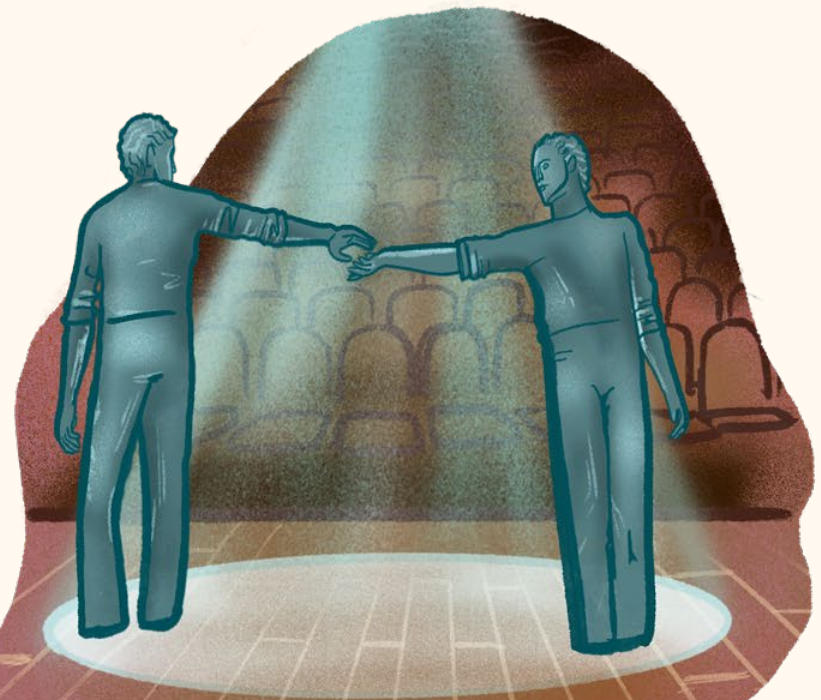
'[...] in theatre you've just more of a sort of unit. Nearly like a family - like coming together to make this thing. You work so intensely together for such a long period of time, and you really want this thing to work and for people to enjoy it. You do welcome people into what you've created.'

She also loves how theatre can deal with complex issues such as Northern Ireland's own history. The only concern for her in terms of the work is how sustainable it will be to continue in the profession and stay in Derry.

Theatre may be Caoimhe's favourite artform to take part and work in, but music is her favourite to go to as a patron. She attends both smaller events and bigger festivals. However, she recognises that Derry is often ruled out as a potential venue for more established musicians, and she typically goes to Belfast for such gigs. She is very aware of the rising costs of tickets. While Caoimhe typically tries to book tickets in advance, her friends often leave it to the last minute to do so. She often brings her boyfriend, even though he was not so keen initially; before they started going out, he had never been to a gig before!

There doesn't seem to be an end to the ways Caoimhe has benefited from having art in her life. In school, she was made to feel that being into music or drama made you 'a weirdo'. Nowadays, many of her dearest friends are those that she met in those very classes. The arts have given her friendship, confidence and will always be a part of her life.

“You think of art as like, sitting down and painting a picture. But it’s so much more. Different wee events and stuff that my parents would have taken us to be creative. We would have made objects or butterflies or - I don’t know - it was always like art stuff. And it was really fun. It really helped us bond as a family and oh, I know I could talk about this for ages....”





Chris

Fermanagh and Omagh



Chris is a man who contains a multitude of experiences. He could lay claim to being from many places. Perhaps in Scotland. Or Enniskillen, where he moved as a child with his family. Maybe the Republic of Ireland, where his mother is from. What can ground someone, make someone feel at home, when they could choose to be elsewhere? For Chris, it's family and connection with the land.

When Chris shared his story, he was warm, open, and articulate – the qualities that he wants to give to his community, too. Something else that he appreciates about outdoor and heritage sites is that you can just exist there – you don't necessarily need to spend money, which removes a barrier for him and others, particularly during the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

“I'm very open - I experience challenges with mental health and I have done for years. The outdoors is the best medicine and having access to these kinds of places where you can go and either clear your head [...] to have that as accessible to as many people as possible, I think is really important.”

Chris would mostly engage with the outdoors and events in Fermanagh – going to events in Castle Coole, visiting the Marble Arch Caves or Castle Archdale – because he doesn't have to travel far to do so and wants to support things locally. He would also visit Belfast, Dublin, or the North Coast, but these are trickier as they require more planning, more time, and often

much more expense (particularly if he ends up having to stay overnight). He has the desire to go and see more places, but sometimes finds these barriers difficult as public transport isn't the most extensive or reliable.

As a stand-in for these visits, he'll often watch documentaries on the landscapes of NI, as that reminds him of the beauty and expanse of the environment, too. He does think, overall, more happens in Fermanagh now than he remembers happening before, and he thinks part of this is the community spirit incurred during the pandemic.

He wants to go to more, see more, and understand more locally in both heritage and arts.

‘[...] especially being part of a small town unless you're willing to get involved and go see these places, you'll never feel like part of the community. So, you have to put yourself out there and go to these events. And that's kind of what has changed – trying to get involved in and go to these things. [...] I find it enjoyable. But to every time I go there, every time I do some of those things. I feel like I'm learning something new about the area.....along a walk or a little thing that haven't spotted to read a little plaque. And actually, I think there's part of an obligation amongst the local community to actually learn a bit more about where we live.’

As a child, he had been involved in sports, but recognises that his relationship with the outdoors has become deeper and more important to him as he's gotten older. After struggling with his mental health for quite some time, Chris now puts himself forward for more, pushes himself more, and recognises that

for him to feel attuned to himself and the world around him, that he needs to go after things and not wait for them to come to him.

Given the nature of the location, he thinks this can be more difficult compared to urban life where some may have things just down the road, but feels embodying this is all the more essential as a result. He says without this outlook, he wouldn't be where he is now, and that it helps him appreciate both his local area and the wider world.

'[I have] more respect for - I think the fact that we have these things here, and to be utilised for our enjoyment, and for the community's pleasure and what have you. Respect for the people in that industry, and how hard they work to upkeep - whether it be the grounds facilities or what have you. And a lot of it comes with age and experience and going, 'Oh, my God, look at what we've got on our doorstep'. I think it's just made me really appreciate the community, and just how lucky we are these things when I've lived in various places where we don't have those things on our doorstep.'





Sandra

Lisburn and Castlereagh



Sandra was born in Portadown, grew up between Armagh and South Belfast. She recently moved in with her mother to care for her as she lives with Alzheimer's disease. Now in her early 60s, Sandra has always been a go-getter, taking initiative at every opportunity and quickly picking herself back up when faced with challenges.

Her 3 children are at the centre of her life and her pride for them was palpable during our conversation. She talked about them almost instantly, telling us about how she raised them and the kind of people they've become. As they were growing up, she always ensured creativity was part of their lives. Driving each of them to various classes became a regular occurrence, from singing lessons, speech and drama classes to ballet and tap dancing. She wanted them to try as many things as possible so they could discover their own passion. "Ironically, those passions are still there" she boasted. Indeed, she's witnessed how their involvement in arts and culture has impacted them in a positive way. All of them are still actively engaged: one daughter has created her own theatre company and her eldest daughter sings and has recorded performances on SoundCloud. Sandra is very proud of them.

"I've always valued arts and culture and always appreciated it. And I've seen what it can do for my children. I see what it does in everyday life with elderly people and people living with dementia and my own mum."

Sandra founded, Remember When Ltd providing reminiscence therapy through the use of objects from the past which trigger memories with the elderly including those living with dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Sandra didn't always work in the health sector as after graduating from QUB she was known by many as the Lady of Mars a.k.a. the only girl going into newsagents, grocery stores and wholesalers all across Northern Ireland and beyond during the Troubles to check Mars confectionery products on their shelves. When she started having children, she joined her then-husband to help him with his own company that manufactured equipment to improve the quality of life of children with special needs.

Sandra grew up in a creative family: She recalls piano and recorder lessons, school plays, her mum put on shows at the golf club, her dad played guitar, sang and wrote poetry. He transmitted this creativity to Sandra and her sibling which she then passed on to her own children. When she was younger, she would have gone to the theatre and cinema with her mum, learnt songs with her granny and her dad and went to shows when they travelled to London. She also used to put on plays with her friends, sibling and neighbours in which they would make up stories and create costumes from clothes and objects she would find at her granny's house.

Today, arts and culture is still present in her day-to-day life, mostly within her work. Sandra notices the great power that art holds when it comes to reminiscence therapy, stimulating, empowering and engaging people to communicate, to laugh, to experience joy and improving their mental health.

“Music is a great uplifter particularly for the elderly, you know, because they know the lyrics of all those old songs. When I’m reminiscing with older people, they’ll still sing the nursery rhymes.”

“He knows when I come in, we will sing *‘It is well with my soul’*. So the power of music and art can trigger recall having a positive impact on mood and feeling, increasing communication and supporting those living with a terminal disease. You know, if you just bring a wee bit of joy and the twinkle comes back in the eye for a moment, or you witness as I did a tenor harmonising and singing and can send the video to his family sharing the joyousness, it’s priceless.”





Matthias

Mid and East Antrim



Matt has a complicated relationship with his hometown of Carrickfergus. At 25, he's lived there most of his life, but he doesn't feel like the town represents who he is.

He felt this way throughout his youth, and often ventured to Belfast in search of arts and culture that resonated with him in venues like the Lyric, the Crescent Arts Centre or the MAC. The first time he stepped into the MAC, his mind was blown – the artwork and the buzz of activity amazed him. He still feels a disconnect with his hometown as an adult, finding its arts scene a little bit 'one note' at times. He'd love to see more diverse culture in Carrickfergus, something more challenging to the individual.

As a youngster, Matt felt much more engaged with the arts and would frequently take part in auditions and workshops. His true passion is acting, which he studied in Bangor and Cumbria. But as is the case for so many people, the pandemic took a toll on Matt's mental health. He found himself retreating from arts and culture during the lockdowns. His struggles with confidence and self-image have changed the way Matt interacts with the sector. It's harder for him to pursue acting in the way he did before – and acting was what helped him build confidence in the first place when he was growing up.

He finds it difficult to find a creative community close to home and his classmates from college aren't as into theatre as they once were. Matt finds it difficult to convince them to come along to the events that pique his interest, or alcohol-free ones (he doesn't feel particularly aligned with club culture). Most of the things he wants to check out to would mean taking public transport, something he finds severely lacking in Northern Ireland, especially for late-night events.

But it's not all doom and gloom in Matt's creative life. He's found new ways to be creative – behind the scenes this time. He has a newfound interest in photography and enjoys the way it allows him to be creative without the same level of pressure he felt with acting. Though he's not quite as much of a participant as he used to be, Matt's found a lot of joy and meaning in being a spectator and is building back the confidence to attend events more often. Being part of the audience is a comfortable way for him to experience arts and culture, without feeling like he's under a spotlight.

"I really like the separation of being an audience member. It's like, I get to experience it, but I'm also not at risk of being judged."

Even though he struggles to enlist his friend group to attend with him, Matt's undeterred. He goes to events on his own, and though this was daunting at first, he's learning not to worry too much about flying solo. While Matt initially felt embarrassed to rock up to shows on his own, a solo jaunt to see The Cranberries in 2017 in the Waterfront Hall ended up being his most meaningful experience with the arts to date – and he almost didn't go! He saw a post online from a group of strangers with a spare ticket and decided to tag along. He's since attended more gigs on his own and is getting used to it. Most of the events he goes to align with his interests.

Matt loves gaming and music, and he's interested in talks about the creative process. He finds events he likes the look of on social media. His most recent favourite was a talk given

by Doom creator John Romero as part of the NI Science Festival at the MAC. He enjoyed it so much that he wrote to the MAC about it, and asked them to programme more events like it.

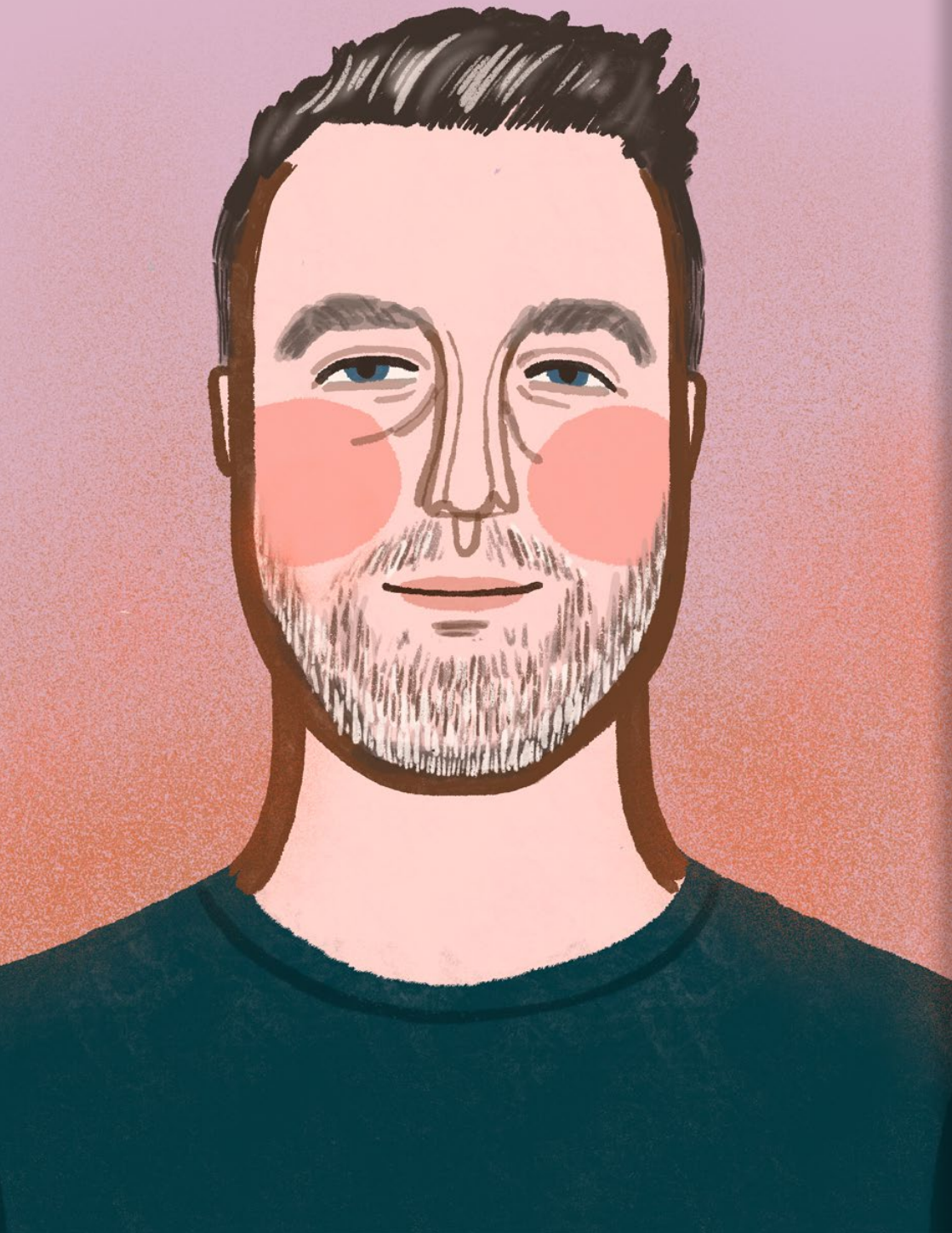
When he's not flying solo, Matt attends events with his mum or his friends. He recently went to the Van Gogh Exhibition with his mum and was pleasantly surprised by how much he enjoyed it, even though it's not something he would have ever thought to go to on his own. Matt was moved by the exhibition and found himself identifying with some of the themes of Van Gogh's work.

'You know to hear about this man's life and the art he created, as an artist, there are similar parallels I can draw on. Like, he had a lot of his own problems. Maybe mine aren't entirely detached from that?'

Involvement in the arts is cathartic for Matt, be it through attending a gig in the Deer's Head or picking up his camera to take some photos. Without the arts, he reckons he'd be much more isolated. Matt's autistic and struggled with making friends growing up, but arts and culture have offered him a kind of freedom, an escape from the pressures of daily life. It has a central role in his view of the world.

"We live for culture, that's what gives life meaning. That's how I feel about it."





Cathal

Mid Ulster



To say that Cathal is enthusiastic about the arts would be an understatement. He sees it as an escape from everyday life, describing how it “makes you realise there’s more to life than work.” The arts combine many of his passions including writing, literature and history.

Cathal works as an education researcher in Co. Tyrone. His father was a teacher, as well as an acclaimed musician. He also fondly remembers childhood visits to Dungannon Library with his mother and siblings. As a result, Cathal was brought up with an appreciation for culture and the arts, particularly of Ulster’s strong tradition of oral history and lore.

Cathal himself has written several books about the culture and folklore of Tyrone and Donegal and was previously a member of a local history society that celebrated the O’Neill dynasty of Tyrone. He discovered that this group was not only a place he could meet with like-minded people to discuss local history, but a chance to engage with people from different backgrounds. The group and the trips they went on proved to be a great way to break down barriers for him. He cites this ability for culture to break down sectarian or social divisions as one of its key strengths.

Cathal studied English Literature and History at university, something that has had a lasting impact on his political outlook, particularly the benefits of democratising access to the arts. Cathal is currently studying for a PhD at Ulster University, examining library access for post-primary pupils in disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland and the role of libraries in developing knowledge and life skills. Cathal thinks it’s important to highlight these issues,

and to advocate for libraries as safe spaces and access points for cultural learning.

As a father of three, Cathal doesn’t get to attend as many cultural events as he would like but he has many favourite haunts both locally and in Belfast. Locally, he loves the Seamus Heaney Centre, Burnavon and Hill of the O’Neill in Dungannon. He feels lucky that there are so many facilities right on his doorstep. He especially enjoys going to theatre and cultural talks. He has previously attended the John Hewitt Summer School and wishes there were more creative writing workshops available close by. Cathal’s wife shares his interest in history and culture, and she often accompanies him to events when they find the time to attend.

“We have a common love, you know, in local history in particular, really it’s about your heritage. It’s very important to not only celebrate it but pass it on if you can, and make others aware of their heritage, their culture.”

While he loves going to events nearby, he tends to make it more of an occasion when he visits Belfast by having a meal, seeing friends, making a full day of it. He particularly loves the atmosphere of the Lyric theatre, where he feels one can almost become part of the show they are watching.

Cathal doesn't see the arts as purely a form of entertainment or a source of education. He personally has found it to be a form of solace for his mental health as well. About five years ago, after a family bereavement, he took a course in art therapy. He found it to be really helpful and believes that more people should embrace the arts in their lives.

Without culture, Cathal feels the world would be very bland, and would lack an essential form of release. As he puts it, life **“would be very black and white [without the arts]. I think it adds a touch of colour. I think it's good for the soul.”**

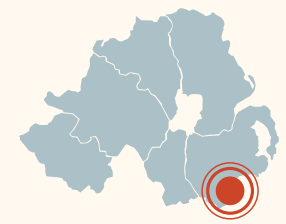
“...the bereavement - It was a really, really terrible time in all our family's life, but to have that art therapy really helped me, it definitely helped the recovery. Sometimes you can't identify the actual tangible impact [of the arts]. But I think that the impact is genuine in terms of health, in terms of mental health.”





Claire

Newry, Mourne, and Down



Claire has the gift of knowing how to follow her heart. Based in Annalong, Claire is only 27 and already has a lifetime's worth of skills which she wants to pass on to as many people as she can. She is a workshop leader with qualifications in youth work and experience in outdoor learning, and a stalwart part of her local community. Her life has been shaped by her experiences and surroundings, led by her curiosity of tactile arts. She was originally set to study architecture and engineering due to a self-imposed idea of following something 'respectable'. However, after a period of illness and its subsequent consequences in her life, Claire decided to trust her gut and study art instead, with a focus on tacit knowledge and endangered crafts. During her studies, she gained experience at the Linenhall Library as a researcher on linen history and craft in Northern Ireland. She's been gathering and sharing knowledge on traditional and contemporary craft ever since.

Claire is active in Moneydarragh Hub outside Newry, both as part of the committee and as a volunteer. Formerly a primary school – the very school she attended – Moneydarragh is now a community hub with aims of becoming a space in which people from all walks of life can gather and learn from each other. Moneydarragh has all sorts of classes – poetry, storytelling, animation – and is volunteer-run. Claire tries to go to as many classes as she can (she's in the midst of learning guitar and has turned her hand to woodworking), but you can normally find her teaching on her speciality: metalworking and silversmithing. She has a workshop there where she creates her own jewellery for sale and metalwork to commission. She knows how important it is to have an accessible space where culture and participation are one within the local area, because that's the best way to get

people to understand why these things are relevant to them and engage with them positively. It also as gives local people the opportunity to try and explore new things. Claire wants services to be provided by people in the wider creative and local community, by people who know what they need best. Claire travels to Belfast often for gigs or films she wants to see, alone or with friends, so she understands how much more effort it takes to involve yourself in things if you're living outside of a perceived area of cultural ongoing. Moneydarragh is also located between an Orange Hall and GAA grounds, so she hopes it may act as a meeting place for both communities and those outside of them.

“Because when I grew up, the only options for getting involved in cultural activities I suppose was bands as, parade bands, or sports. And I wasn't a great fit for either those activities. I want to help provide things for young people that weren't there when I was a young person that I think I would have benefited from. Well, not just myself, but my friend group too. They weren't the most into that sort of music or sports. So, the courses that we do tend to try and fill a gap that is there in the little locality near Annalong.”

How did Claire know that arts and community was where she should be? As a child, she was pulled in the same direction by many hands: making dozens of Saint Brigid's crosses with her uncle every year, going to museums with her aunt and seeing costumes and artefacts, the family holidays in the caravan along the coast which encouraged her to learn about local folklore and craft history, hiking in the Mourne from when she was wee. It's who she is. She doesn't just want to make 'art' in the eyes of pre-existing ideas of some in the arts sphere but celebrate cultural crafts and rurality.

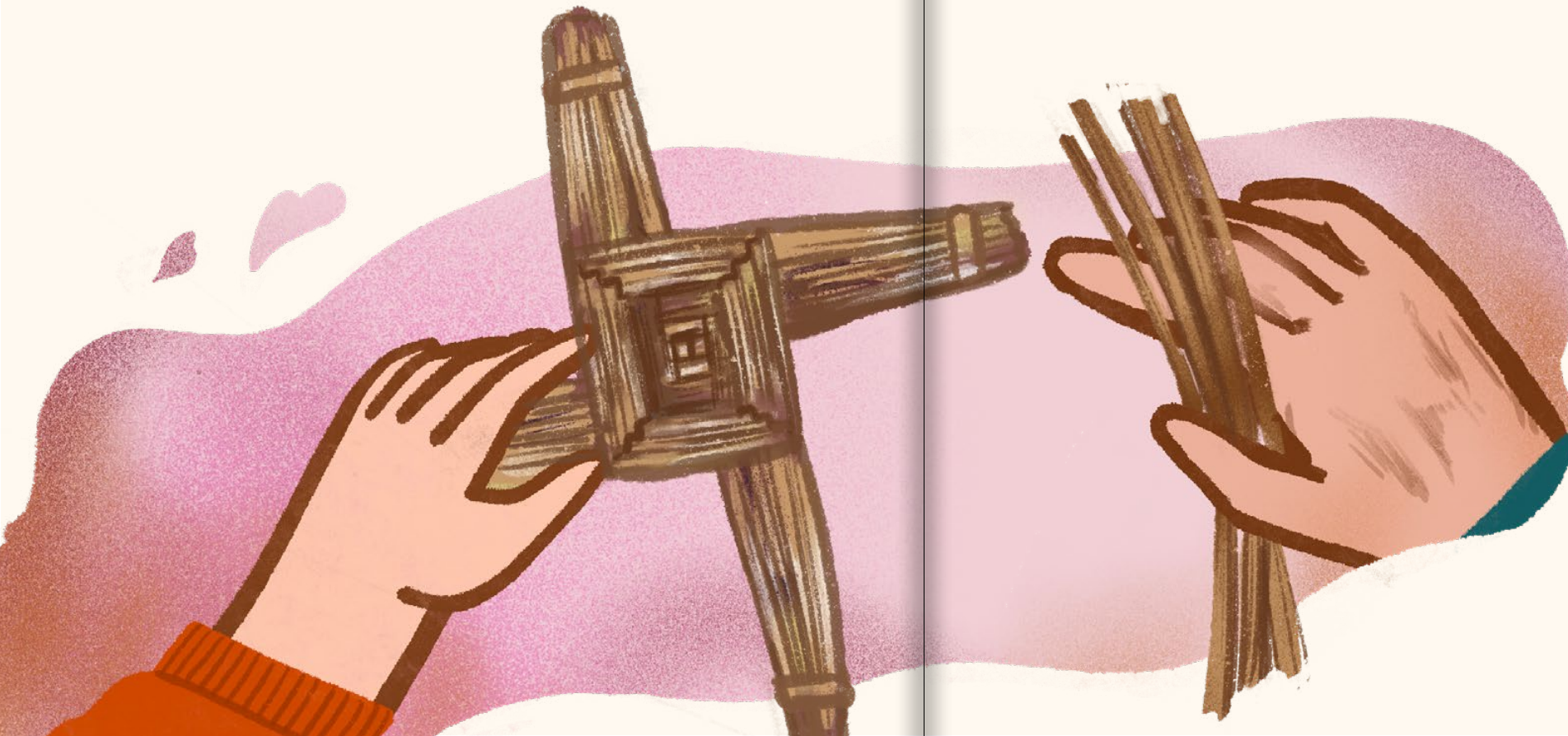
'...sometimes it wasn't necessarily what we were doing, but at the end of the process after he made this insane amount of St Brigid's crosses it was down to the rest of

the family to tie and finish them. By his later years, they weren't the best we made. You could imagine. But again, I was always really young. I was the one that was like poking my own eyes with the stray rushes. But the smell of the room, and everyone doing it together. It's kind of nice and distinctive. The fire would be lit because it would be late January. That is a reoccurring thing, it has really fond connotations to me.'

For Claire, arts and culture are a way to explore all that you might be able to do, as well as ways to connect and learn about your environment and the people in it. Without arts, heritage, and culture, she feels she'd be a lot lonelier and less satisfied with her output in the world.

“On a good day, it's really fulfilling to be able to do something you love, see progress in what you're doing and to pass a craft or object onto others; be that physically as a memento or that says something or carries a sense of meaning.'

'I'm happier for it. I feel like I've given back to the little local area too.'”





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